

IMAGINARIES OF A 'EUROPE OF THE REGIONS'

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Introduction

"I have not come here this evening to talk to you about a utopia; no, I am here to talk to you about an adventure the federating of Europe."

These are the words of Denis de Rougemont (1948, p.1), the Swiss philosopher and scholar, given at a talk on 22nd of April 1948 at the Sorbonne, Paris. He was advocating for the cultural, historical regions to become the sub-European political units instead of nation states. I start this essay with his statement not because I necessarily agree with his views, but because he is the person who coined the term 'Europe of the regions' in his book *The idea of Europe*, which appeared in English in 1966 (de Rougemont, 1966). Donald Tusk (2016), former President of the European Union (EU), called him "a philosopher of regionalism" and "a pioneer of the EU motto of 'unity in diversity'". I also started this essay with de Rougemont because of his take on what constitutes Europe. In his book, he traces the history of the idea from the Greek myth of the abduction of Europa by Zeus to the 18th and 19th century federalist ideas of Napoleon and the 1960s European Community, and concludes that the search for Europe is to build Europe; that, Europe is only to be found in the process of creating it (de Rougemont, 1966). This relational perspective somewhat resonates with what I am going to discuss about 'the region' and a 'Europe of the regions'.

Ever since the birds-eye view of Chicago adorned the cover of Daniel Burnham's *Plan for the city* in 1909, regional space has been subject to multiple and competing imaginaries. Many geographers have emphasized that, "there is no such thing as a single, uniquely defined 'region'" (Duncan, 1960, p.402) out there waiting to be defined and demarcated; and that, "there is nothing ontologically given about the traditional divisions between urban and regional, national and global scale" (Smith, 1993, p.73). Nevertheless, the ontology of the region is still often taken as a given, and 'the region' is conceptualised as a bounded territory that is neatly positioned in a nested hierarchy from global to local, like Russian dolls. Moving beyond this conceptualisation

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as well as beyond the territorial versus relational space, I draw on my previous work on the concept of imaginary (Davoudi, 2018a) and suggest that, at any point in time and space, there are multiple imaginaries of the region which are jostling to find a central position in the political processes of scalar fixing which is pursued by both the EU and nation states. Examples of these multiple imaginaries include seeing the region as a: cultural space of shared rituals, social space of everyday life, political space of advocacy and resistance, biophysical space of ecological interconnections, virtual space of information flows, and functional space of economic exchanges (Davoudi, 2008, 2018b). However, I would argue that despite this diversity, the economic imaginary has prevailed and has, since the 1990s, become co-constitutive of a neoliberal political project. This, to some extent, explains the limited success of the European regionalisation goal. Before elaborating on this, I briefly sketch the main features of the two concepts that are central to my argument: imaginary and scalar fixing (for a full account see Davoudi and Brooks, forthcoming).

Imaginary

There is a growing literature in which the term imaginary is used or implied, but rarely engaged with conceptually. This is despite the fact that, as a concept, imaginary has a long intellectual history. I have provided a fuller account of this history elsewhere (e.g. Davoudi, 2018a; Davoudi and Brooks, forthcoming). Here it suffices to reiterate Charles Taylor's definition of social imaginaries as "the ways people imagine their social existence, and how they fit together with others..." (Taylor, 2004, p.23). Seen in this way, "social imaginary is that which produces a community, holds it together by giving it temporary coherence and identity, and subjects it to change" (Davoudi, 2018a, p.100). More relevant to the focus of this essay is the concept of spatial imaginary which was first introduced by Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978). In this pioneering work, Said showed how the spatial imaginaries of 'the Orient' were constructed and propagated through a plethora of both ideas (narratives, stories, travelogues) and artefacts (paintings, maps, transcripts) to achieve colonial goals. What Said added to the established mental mapping traditions of behavioural and environmental geographers, was a Foucauldian view which turned his imaginative geographies into "profoundly ideological landscapes whose representations of space are entangled with relations of power" (Gregory, 1995, p.474). So, rather than seeing spatial imaginaries as static linguistic representations of actually existing places out there, he saw them as performative acts which through a nexus of power, knowledge and geography, call certain scales, such as the region, into being, and legitimise certain political goals, such as European regionalisation.

Scalar Fixing

The critical questions are: what motivates regionalisation as a political goal? Why do we witness periodic reshufflings of government structures, or re-allocation of power to different tiers of governance? In addressing these questions scholars have drawn upon the concept of the scalar fix which is an extension of David Harvey's (2000, p.54) provocation that, "capitalism cannot do without its spatial fixes". He argues that the endemic crises of capital accumulations are temporarily resolved by reconfiguring space and the rescaling of governance powers and responsibilities. Inspired by the work of Henri Lefebvre, he suggests that, "the inner contradictions of capitalism are expressed through the restless formation and re-formation of geographical landscapes" (Harvey, 1985, p.150). This restless search for scalar fixing is, of course, a contested political process that is infused with tensions and contradictions and has uncertain outcomes.

Since the 2nd World War, in Europe and in many nation states, regions have been key candidates for rescaling. Imagined as economic spaces, they have been periodically invoked as the 'right' scale of governance, using a variety of rationalisation but with two distinct ideological bases. One is the cohesion-oriented welfare state rationality and the other is the competitiveness-oriented neoliberal rationality, as discussed below.

The Cohesion-Oriented Rationality of Regionalization

In the postwar, Fordist economy and Keynesian welfare state, regions were invoked as the right scale for the distribution of national economic growth and the reduction of territorial disparities. Emphasis was put on directing development opportunities, public funding and private investments towards economically

disadvantaged regions. A classic example of such policies is Jean-François Gravier's 1947 book *Paris et le Desert Français* in which he promoted the creation of growth poles outside Paris. At the European level, this was clearly reflected in the Treaty of Rome, 1957 which aimed to "reduce the differences between the regions and the backwardness of the less favoured regions" by promoting a "harmonious development of economic activities" and "a continuous and balanced expansion" (Article 2). It was also echoed in the early EU regional policies which aimed to "improve the harmony of regional structures in the Community" (CEC, 1969). Regions were imagined as Keynesian economic spaces, enacting the egalitarian ideals of the so called European social models (Davoudi, 2007). However, many such constructed regions remained "subordinated to distributive imperatives of the centre" (Martin and Sunley, 1997, p.280), and served "primarily as transmission belts for national economic and social politics" (Jessop, 2002, p.71). At the European level, nation states 'called the shots' and remained in charge of the negotiations over the allocation of European Regional Development Funds which was introduced in 1975.

The Competitiveness-Oriented Rationality of Regionalization

In the late 1980s, the rationalisation for economic imaginaries of the region began to change in response to post-Fordist crises of globalising capitalism, which in Europe were compounded by the introduction of the Single European Market and the Economic and Monetary Union. Both of these were expected to increase regional disparities, as clearly stated in the following excerpt from the ESDP (1999, p.7).

Competition in the Single European Market is one of the driving forces for spatial development in the EU ... Regions ... compete with each other ... however, not all European regions start from a similar point.

Thus, throughout the 1980s and 1990s, the EU, like many nation states, tried to re-energise regional rescaling, and actively pursued the 'Europe of the regions' goal through a number of direct and indirect mechanisms (such as those listed below), notably the creation of the Committee of the Regions which was enabled by the Maastricht Treaty in 1992.

- Engaging directly with regions in member states
- Doubling the structural funds and using its allocation to demand regionalisation in member states
- Setting up:
 - Regional Policy Committee of the European Parliament, 1980s
 - Association of European Regions, 1984
 - Consultative Committee of Local & Regional Authorities, 1988
 - Committee of the Region, 1994
 - The INTERREG program for cross-border activities
- Publishing regional discussion documents such as:
 - Europe 2000, 1991

Through these and other material and discursive practices, the economic imaginary of the region was circulated and performed to solidify the region as the scalar fix of post-Fordist crises in both Europe and nation states; but this time with a radically different rationalisation which put greater emphasis on: economic competitiveness, promotion of endogenous growth, entrepreneurial governance and 'regions for themselves'. As reflected in the following ministerial statement in Britain, regions were brought to the fore, or called into being, on the basis of these neoliberal rationalities.

Bringing "regions to the fore" would "help improve the competitiveness of our firms, and boost entrepreneurial spirit (DETR, 1997, p.7).

Even in social democratic countries such as Denmark, traditional egalitarian values were dismissed by the Ministry of the Environment as outdated political goals:

It is the government's view that the earlier form of development pursued by the nationwide goal of equality is outdated...Attention must be given to harnessing the development potential of the regions to strengthen Denmark's position internationally (Quoted in Davoudi et al., 2019, p.25).

Influential figures, such as Tony Blair, former British Prime Minister, criticised the European social model as outdated, and urged the EU leaders “to make a definitive stand in favour of market reform” (quoted in *The Economist*, 2000, p.17).

‘New Regionalists’ Legitimation

A major contributor to neoliberal legitimization of regional rescaling and its dominant economic imaginaries was the theoretical rationalisation by influential economic geographers who were implicitly promoting a Europe of the regions, as is shown in the following examples:

As Europe becomes a unified market, with free movement of capital and labour, it will make less and less sense to think of the relations between its component nations in terms of the standard [national] paradigm of international trade. Instead the issues will be those of regional economics (Krugman, 1991, p.8).

Competitors in many internationally successful industries, and often entire clusters of industries are often located in a single town or region within a nation (Porter, 1990, p.154).

According to Charles Taylor’s definition, “imaginaries are not theories or doctrines per se, (but) they may start by discursive practices of theorists” (Davoudi, 2018a, p.102), and as these practices become embedded through citations and repetitions, they “generate more and more far reaching claims on political life” (Taylor, 2004, p.5). This is exactly what happened in the 1990s when neoliberal economic imaginaries of the region were promoted and legitimated by a distinct epistemic rationality called ‘new regionalism’ (a term first used by Keating, 1998 and Lovering, 1999). This orthodoxy was underpinned by three claims about: the primacy of economic agglomeration, the determining role of the so called institutional thickness, and the hollowing out of nation states. Together, they enacted the region as: “the agent of wealth creation”, “the ‘crucible’ of economic development in post-Fordist era”, and “the ‘prime focus’ for post-Keynesian governance and planning” (Davoudi and Brooks, forthcoming). Some commentators even predicted that by the 1990s we would “leave the Europe of competing nationalisms behind us”, the nation state would break up and “a European federation of equal regions” would be created (Kearney, 1988, p.8 and 15).

These widely circulated ‘new regionalist’ ideas rationalised and essentialised the region as the optimal scalar fix of a neoliberal political economy and by so doing, they helped to ingrain ‘the region’ in the elites’ imagination, as reflected in this statement by an EU official:

The Europe of the regions is already a cultural reality and in the new European single market there will soon be an economic one. Why not turn it into a political reality too? (The Chef de Cabinet to the Regional Commissioner, cited in Harvie, 1994, p.59)

New regionalists also ignited a host of normatively charged claims not only about what a region was, but also about what it ought to be. Some regions were glorified: as ‘success stories’, as ‘basic motors’ of global economic growth, and as “the leading-edges of the contemporary post-Fordist economy” (Scott, 2001, p.818). Others were stigmatized as lagging behind, peripheral and beyond salvation. Idealized imaginaries such as these divide the world into Orient and Occident, Europe into core and periphery, and countries into north and south, or east and west. These dualities are mediated and performed through myriads of practices such as: cartographical demarcations of boundaries, colour coding and zoning, metaphorical significations (such as the European ‘Blue banana’ or ‘Pentagon’), and calculations and classifications (such as the classification of regions under the EU’s Cohesion Policy). They disseminate narratives of their own inevitability and become “self-fulfilling prophecies” (Watkins, 2015, p.513). Moreover, places that do not live up to these imaginaries no longer matter, as was bluntly suggested by Tim Leunig, a British economist. He told a conference full of Liverpudlians that Liverpool had no future; that

if we really want to give people in Liverpool, Sunderland, and so on the opportunities that people in most parts of the south-east take for granted, we need to let many of them move to the south-east (Leunig, 2008).

Some people dismissed his remarks as laughable, but as others noted (Liverpool Echo, 2013) it was not a laughing matter at all. On the contrary, it was a terrifying glimpse of a neoliberal strategy for cutting back public spending in places that were considered to be beyond salvation.

'New regionalism' and experts' rationalisations, such as the above, helped to depoliticise the 'Europe of the regions' project by giving it scientific legitimacy but, it could not entirely eradicate the politics of rescaling and the political struggles for coalition building (Jessop, 2010), as is clearly evident in the reactions to the Europe of the regions project. The project has attracted a spectrum of proponents and opponents at all levels.

Proponents of a Europe of the Regions

Among the proponents are firstly, those who support regionalisation as a pathway to devolution of power and enhanced local democracy. They resonate with what Dente (1997) calls, 'cooperative federalists' who look for shared competencies and joint policy making in the EU multi-level governance system which does include nation states.

Secondly, there are the so called 'regional-nations', such as Scotland, Corsica, and Catalonia, with a strong sense of cultural identity and historical desire for self-determination and sovereignty. They support European regionalisation because it offers them a gateway to independence while lowering its costs, given that they continue to benefit from their association with a larger political collective. This is clearly reflected in a 2018 speech by the Catalan separatist leader who wants Catalan "to be a nation inside Europe with the tools of a nation" (Carles Puigdemont, quoted in euobserver, 2018). This view became even more explicit in the 2019 speech by Scotland's First Minister who stated that, "Norway is a shining example of how small, northern European nations which are independent have been able to use their powers, not simply to improve the lives of their citizens at home but to play a constructive part on the world stage" (Nicola Sturgeon, quoted in The Scotsman, 2020).

Regional nations epitomise Benedict Anderson's (1991) 'imagined communities' and demonstrate that, "a nation exists when a significant number of people imagine themselves to form a nation, or behave as if they have formed one" (Seton-Watson, 1977, p.5). Their socio-spatial imaginary not only brings their region into existence, it also shapes their own individual and social identity. They see themselves as an imagined regional community. A third group of supporters are what Dente (1997) calls 'competitive federalists'. This group includes, notably, the rich regions which are seeking a devolution of tax power and an enhancement of their own competitive advantages.

Opponents of a Europe of the Regions

Among the opponents of a Europe of the regions are firstly, the nation states which consider themselves as the losers of its changing power geometries. Secondly, there are the anti-EU parties which, over the last decade, have almost doubled their votes and significantly contributed to the deterioration of public opinions about the EU and distrust of its institutions (Dijkstra et al., 2018).

The biggest irony is that both the supporters and opponents are effectively undermining the Europe of the regions project; one inadvertently, the other deliberately. The opponents are inadvertently undermining the very project that they support because, their desire for independence is interpreted as the beginning of political instability and the dismantling of the EU economic integration which has always been a core political goal. As the euobserver (24/1/2018) put it, "fears of Balkanisation and more Brexits have killed off an earlier ideal of a Europe of the regions". The opponents are deliberately undermining not only a Europe of the regions, but also the whole idea of Europe and its political as well as economic integration.

Geographies of Discontent

There are many reasons for the contemporary rise in anti-EU sentiments but, one important factor, which is of utmost relevance to spatial planners, is the growing geography of discontent or, as Andres Rodrigues-Pose (2017) puts it, 'the revenge of the places that don't matter'. To understand this phenomenon, we need to look more closely at the neoliberal approach to inequalities and its reliance on the 'invisible hand of the market', rather than democratic development intervention. For Fredrick Hayek, a key intellectual architect of neoliberalism, the ideal solutions for tackling disparities was the self-organizing dynamic of the markets which he called a "theory of spontaneous order" (Hayek, 1969, p.97). It is this rationality that underpins Leunig's view, mentioned above, and also reflected in the following claims by the Economist journal (2013, p.15):

Fairness is not the right measure by which to judge an urban policy. Scarce resources should go where they will generate the greatest returns. Trying to resist the agglomeration effects of big cities is not just a waste: it is actively harmful to Britain's economy. Better to do the opposite and encourage London and other successful cities to keep growing.

Neoliberalism dismisses fairness as a value, considers any intervention in agglomeration forces as a waste of resources, and suggests that the best we can do is to let the growing regions grow further until the market corrects the imbalances. But, the neoliberal obsession with agglomeration economies and its trickle down claims are not working. On the contrary, they have widened inequalities (Blanchet et al., 2019) and have led to some places being not simply 'left behind' – as Teresa May, former British Prime Minister, put it in the 2017 Conservative manifesto – but, actually kept behind. They are kept behind by decades of neglect and the failure of neoliberal economic policies to tackle persisting territorial inequalities.

The growing disparities have been a factor in the limited success of European regionalisation but not the only factor. There are equally important socio-cultural factors. So far, a Europe of the regions has remained an elite project, motivated primarily by economic imaginaries of the region and performed through technocratic practices which are not sufficient for creating imagined political communities. What has been missing are social and cultural practices (Paasi, 2001) that assign meanings to particular places; practices such as: cultural traditions, rituals, legends, languages, stories, and memories which can bind together heterogeneous and spatially dispersed people into imagined regional communities. While many such communities exist all over Europe, their spatial imaginaries do not always correspond with governments' or EU's constructed regions. An example of such a mismatch came to the fore at the height of regionalisation in the 1990s when the UK government tried to institutionalise the regional scale by using the official demarcation of the so called 'standard regions'. This led to strong oppositions in Cornwall which is an area in the south west region of England with a deep sense of Cornish identity. The following statement by the chair of the Cornish Constitutional Convention is a good indication of the mismatch between governments' and people' imaginaries of what and where the region is. He said:

Before we go down the road of deciding what we want to do, we ought to ask ourselves what it is we mean by the term region. ... Because we have a very strong sense of ourselves, our geography, our culture, and of our constitutional position in Britain... (quoted in Jones and MacLeod, 2004, p.443).

As I mentioned above, 'new regionalism' provided scientific legitimacy for the Europe of the regions but, in so doing, it replaced its traditional cultural principle of unity in diversity with a neoliberal economic principle of fragmented competition where the winners take all. So, in some ways, new regionalist rationality killed off the regionalisation project, whilst its prediction about 'the death of the nation state' proved to be greatly exaggerated (Anderson, 1995). On the contrary, nationalism, in various guises, is on the rise and if nation states have lost autonomy, this is not because their power has 'gone upwards' to the EU. It is because it has 'gone sideways' to multinational corporations, or as Strange (1994) puts it, it has 'gone nowhere' or just 'evaporated' given that political controls over multinational corporations has diminished substantially.

Concluding Remarks

Going back to the regionalisation project, it is important to note that even successful rescaling can only offer a temporary solution to the crises of capitalism. This means that the search for a new scalar fix and its constitutive scalar imaginaries continues; as does the tension between different rationalities for legitimating them. In the UK, for example, attentions have already moved away from the region to the city-region as the new article of faith for tackling the endemic crises of capitalism and growing spatial inequalities. Similarly, the search is also ongoing for the researchers who seek a better understanding of: how spatial imaginaries emerge, circulate and solidify; why certain imaginaries become dominant; what kinds of rationalities legitimise them; which political projects they serve; and crucially, what are the implications for justice, democracy and sustainability?

These are not 'blue sky' academic questions; they have profound practical implications because the way we imagine space and scale greatly influence the way we govern social relations and plan for the future. As Said (1994, p.7) argued, "the struggle over geography is not only about soldiers and cannons, but also about ideas, forms, images and imaginings". Adding to this insight, the struggle is also about planning policies and practices which are at once the progenitors, the mediums, and the outcomes of spatial imaginaries.

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